

Some Reflections on the Education of English in College

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This article discusses and explores some reasons for the poor proficiency in English shown by Japanese learners which has drawn increasingly fierce criticism from every sector of society and for which school is said to blame to a large extent. A questionnaire was administered to 251 junior college and university students to discover their motivations for English learning. A content analysis of the responses revealed that most of them do not have a clear reason for wanting English fluency and a definite goal for which to study it. This indicates the difficulties college English teachers meet in class and it is suggested that we should define what degree and in what way formal education can and has to do to help foreign language learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is more than a native language of some particular countries. English claims to be an international language, perhaps the international language today. And the Japanese unanimously and increasingly voice that English is a necessity to help in so-called internationalization. The widely spread attitude that every Japanese should be fluent in English, however, has produced unrealistic expectations. There is no simple criterion according to which one can be said to command a foreign language; there are various criteria for successful language learning. Nevertheless, most Japanese have firm conviction that their English is just poor. The more they think their English is poor, their frustrating voice gets louder. Specifically, there is an increasingly louder cry from both society as a whole and school learners for more practical English teaching. Six years of formal English education are required of almost all of them and many take a few more

years of English classes in college. Why is it that after six years of formal instruction most Japanese students do not show a noticeable improvement in English proficiency? This is a question most often posed. Then many people jump to the conclusion that school education, with entrance exams, inadequate teaching methods, poor teachers of a low level of speaking proficiency and so on, is largely responsible for it.

I myself appreciate the value of the traditional English education, but at the same time find some faults in it. The frustration and dissatisfaction with unsuccessful formal instruction a vast majority have is understandable to some extent. Though we do not need to get rid of the whole system, we need to improve on the aspects of the situation which are out of date and unsatisfactory to almost everyone. With the introduction of the new Education Ministry curriculum for high schools coming soon, the time is ripe to consider foreign language education. This paper presents some research conducted to discover university and junior college students' reasons for wanting English. The results obtained and analysed here may be of some use for teachers to provide better instruction at college level.

2. METHOD

The goals of the study I conducted were to examine the learning objectives of college students studying English and identify some reasons for poor efficiency of foreign language education in college.

All of the informants were students at Saitama Women's Junior College and Komazawa University whom I taught. Their fields of study were of various kinds: Saitama Women's Junior College informants (168) were all English majors, whereas Komazawa University students (83), most of them boys, were comprised of 24 law majors, 29 political science majors and 30 business administration majors. In all, 251 freshmen and sophomores participated in this study.

The first language of the informants was Japanese and the questionnaire was in Japanese (see Appendix). One kind of questionnaire consisting of six questions was

distributed to Komazawa group and another kind of questionnaire, with one more question added, was to Saitama group. Anonymous questionnaires were completed and handed back to the investigator within 15 minutes to encourage the frank responses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. LEARNERS' REASONS FOR WANTING ENGLISH FLUENCY

Questions 1 and 2 (Tables 1 and 2) both deal with the subject of learners' needs for English.

Table 1 Learners' Past Experiences in Acute Need of English

	All	Komazawa	Saitama
1. never	15.5%	19.3%	13.7%
2. when travelling abroad	25.1%	18.1%	28.6%
3. when compelled to speak with foreigners within Japan	54.6%	57.8%	53.0%
4. others	4.8%	4.8%	4.7%

Table 2 Learners' Future Need for English

	All	Komazawa	Saitama
1. no future need	3.2%	2.5%	3.6%
2. important in their future jobs	11.6%	3.6%	15.5%
3. for possible contact with a growing number of visiting foreigners	13.5%	18.1%	11.3%
4. for any chance of being compelled to go abroad	3.6%	9.6%	0.6%

5. for positive integration with foreigners inside and outside Japan	17.9%	8.4%	22.6%
6. for travelling abroad for pleasure	6.4%	12.0%	3.6%
7. for qualification	0.4%	1.2%	0.0%
8. as part of general education	41.8%	44.6%	40.5%
9. others	1.6%	0.0%	2.3%

Table 1 shows that of the respondents, a vast majority (54.6%) felt the need for English, when they happened to meet foreigners and were forced to communicate with them in English. They had the difficulty of expressing themselves in English, which made them say "I wish I could speak English fluently". A smaller number (25.1%) wanted English during their travel abroad. And an even smaller number (15.5%) felt no need for English at all in their life, which means 39 respondents, of 251, learnt English in middle school through college, even though they had felt no need for English. Could they be efficient English learners? The answer would be definitely no. English is required not only in middle schools but in most of colleges at first and second years in Japan. They studied English just because it was the thing to do. Surprisingly, there were 23 respondents (13.7%) even among English majors at a junior college who had never experienced the need of English.

Question 2 (Table 2) of the survey asked the respondents to choose which of nine future needs for English they expect. Table 2 illustrates that 41.8% mentioned English learning as part of intellectual sophistication, with 17.9% for future positive integration with foreigners inside Japan and abroad, 13.5% for possible contacts with visiting foreigners, and 11.6% for going by in a job, in a descending order. There are some marked differences between Komazawa and Saitama groups in their choices: junior college English majors regarded English learning as necessary for integration with foreigners more than twice and a half as many and

for job ambition more than four times as many as Komazawa respondents, whereas 9.6% of Komazawa informants needed English study for possible, maybe slight, chances for going abroad, such as overseas dispatch of the Self Defence Forces, in contrast with 0.6% of Saitama girls. Overall, though Komazawa students certainly have an interest in English, they have less clear and definite learning goals to study English than Saitama counterparts.

Teaching English to English majors at the not so high grade junior college level I am currently teaching or to other majors in university as general education, one of the biggest obstacles we encounter is simply this — identifying what the individual needs of the students are. Why exactly do students say they are in English class? If we as English teachers can understand why the students are willing to take our classes, we can naturally provide better instruction. To investigate the motivations of the students, I asked questions 1 and 2, and found the responses to be varied. More than that, even in the case of the most frequent selections, it may be that they could not be called a clear motivation.

Then, what does English learning really mean in Japan, a small island country located far from the U.S.A. and England? Consider the following Table 3.

Table 3 Reasons Saitama Girls Majored in English

	Saitama
1. favorite language	22.6%
2. reputedly important for internationalization	16.7%
3. for active integration with foreigners	27.4%
4. for job needs	14.9%

5. better graded subject in senior high school	7.1%
6. for no particular reason	4.8%
7. advised by others	1.2%
8. others	5.3%

Surprisingly, it is not the case that most of the junior college respondents decided to major in English with a definite objective for which to study it. Their reasons for the selection of English major are diverse and more than a half of them have only rather vague desire of studying English, as observed in the above table. As might be expected and regrettably, they are not eager learners of English.

A distinction is sometimes made, and other times not made, between foreign language learning and second language learning. This distinction is especially significant for those concerned with English language education in Japan. According to Little Wood (1984: 2), "briefly, a second language has social functions within the community where it is learnt..., whereas a foreign language is learnt primarily for contact outside one's own community." The learning of English in Japan would be certainly classified as a foreign language learning. English has no social functions inside the Japanese community and will be used mainly for communication with outsiders. "English as a foreign language" has the significant implication in considering the limited proficiency of Japanese learners and that often compels me to ask myself the frustrating question in class: does everyone really have the compelling need to learn from junior high school through college English which has no social functions inside Japan, even if it is an international language and a necessity for internationalization?

Various factors may interact in complex ways to affect foreign language learning. Among many factors, how successful a person is in learning a foreign

language depends to a large extent on motivation. Motivation can be substituted for objective, need, desire or goal. Motivation is the crucial force which determines what kind of English to study and how to study it. However, as Table 2 shows, the students' learning objectives are not only diverse but also very vague. They often have no clear reasons for learning the foreign language or no definite purposes of what they expect to get from study. As many as 105 respondents mentioned that English learning is for their intellectual refinement. Those who have no clear conception of English learning would never be very successful in language learning. Admittedly, in an English - as - a - foreign - language country like Japan, it may be natural that many do not have a firm learning objective to develop competence in English. Nevertheless, strangely enough, the puzzling atmosphere dominates Japan that everyone should be fluent in English and moreover orally fluent, which is where the trouble comes.

Japan is an island country, with China and Korea not using alphabets as next door neighbors. An English speaking community is not close at hand. This situation was the same or even worse in the past. The U.S.A., Britain or other English speaking countries were not within easy reach. But the distance was not so damaging a handicap in language learning as today, since there was once a specific and legitimate objective to study English, that is, to take in information in written form from the outside developed world and only the small intellectual elite studied English. The grammar - translation method, for example, which is often said to be largely responsible for the poor proficiency, was quite adequate rather than inadequate at the time. Now everything is changed: the globe is getting smaller and smaller with rapidly developing transportation and communication means, and direct interaction with foreign people has significantly been growing. And an increasing number of people has been highly educated. That naturally leads to more learners and more focus on the communicative function of language. English teaching in Japan, accordingly, has to be changed.

However, the recognition of the communicative function of language has presented a very serious problem we had never encountered. The success of

language learning as a communicative instrument depends to a large extent on the nature of community where the learner lives. Japan is truly a “foreign” community and makes very undesirable conditions for language learning. As English is not a second language, but a foreign language, most of English learners do not have specific and compelling learning objectives. Furthermore, they do not really perceive of communicative needs, largely because they have little contact with English speaking people. There are some who wonder if they ever use English for fulfilling the real communicative needs, though even they say “eigo - de perapera shabe - reru youni nari - tai” (I want to speak fluent English). Thus most urgently needed is that school learners of English get to perceive language learning is closely related to communicative needs. We have to make them realize that. In order to achieve this goal, the teaching method more focused on the communicative function of language should be employed as much as possible, however difficult it may be in an artificial classroom in a totally foreign community.

Communicative competence building is a trend which is already current in foreign language education. “Communicative competence” is, however, complex and difficult to define. What kind of communicative competence should learners acquire in school education? Ideally we must consider every communicative need of every learner in terms of his purpose for which the language is to be used. The least we have to do is that we take account of the students’ needs and define the varieties of competence they need as clearly as possible. It would present the radical departure from our traditional grammar - translation method in Japanese formal instruction of English and give a tough challenge to most of English teachers.

3.2. LEARNERS’ PREFERENCE FOR SPEAKING

What is crucial for the acquisition of communicative competence of foreign language is that the learner should have easy and ample access to situations where the target language is used as a means of communication. Within Japan a majority of people find it very difficult to interact with English native speakers at personal levels. Besides, many of them find it unnecessary (Table 4).

Table 4 Learners' Interest in Foreign People

	All	Komazawa	Saitama
1. to want not to interact with foreign people	1.6%	3.6%	0.6%
2. to want to interact positively with foreign people	65.3%	44.6%	75.6%
3. to feel compelled to interact with foreign people	25.5%	43.4%	16.7%
4. to regard native speakers only as English teachers	4.8%	6.0%	4.2%
5. others	2.8%	2.4%	2.9%

More than 30 per cent respondents did not want to interact positively with foreigners. Of special interest is the figure of Komazawa group most of whom are male: more than half were not favorably disposed towards foreigners and had little desire for social integration. By contrast, three quarters of English majors positively wanted to converse with foreigners.

Whether they like foreigners or not, all they say is one and the same phrase: eigo-de perapera shabe-reru youni nari-tai. Without full perception of communicative needs they have somehow got oral communication oriented, and their total preoccupation is with so-called English conversation. To acquire proficiency in English conversation is just their dream, which itself may be nothing bad. But English teachers are at a loss with how to do with their dream. What does "fluent English conversation" mean? What do the students want to speak in English, many of whom do not have the compelling need to learn English and have little perception of the communicative value of language? The following table gives us some hints as to what is "English conversation".

Table 5 Topics of English Conversation

	All	Komazawa	Saitama
1. those topics most frequently coming up among Japanese friends	37.1%	27.7%	41.7%
2. anything about oneself	2.0%	3.6%	1.2%
3. about Japan	8.0%	9.6%	7.1%
4. about foreign countries, in particular, U.S.A. and Britain	22.3%	16.9%	25.0%
5. discussion on a specific topic	3.2%	3.6%	3.0%
6. nothing in particular	23.1%	31.3%	19.0%
7. others	4.3%	7.3%	3.0%

The most frequent choices were: (1) those topics they usually speak in Japanese among friends, say, boy friends or girl friends, their favorite TV programs, part-time jobs and so on, at 37.1%; (2) nothing in particular, at 23.1%; (3) about foreign countries, at 22.3%. The high percentage of "nothing in particular" (23.1%) is of significance to consider the matter of "English conversation". It is not the case that they want to speak in English to get some messages across. Rather, they just want to speak in English.

Table 6 further confirms this tendency often noticed among Japanese learners of English.

Table 6 English Speaking Style Preferences

	All	Komazawa	Saitama
1. not very fluent but rich in content	63.5%	57.8%	66.3%
2. very fluent but poor in content	32.5%	31.4%	33.1%
3. few words regardless of topic	4.0%	10.8%	0.6%

It is no wonder that “not very fluent but rich in content” was No.1 selection, but it is of special interest that “very fluent but poor in content” comprised as high as 32.5%. Question 6 may be a meaningless question: in fact, one respondent said that this question was too absurd to answer. Despite this, I wanted to pose this question and the result was much as expected. The figure reveals what many school learners of English had in mind on English conversation. Their total preoccupation with English conversation is not derived from true communicative needs of language.

William Littlewood observes that there are two main kinds of communicative needs:

- (1) (a)functional needs: the desire to convey messages without misunderstanding, to carry out transactions efficiently, and so on;
- (b)social needs: the desire to use language which is socially acceptable and enables the learner to integrate satisfactorily with the second language community. (pp. 70 - 71)

What the respondents mean by English conversation has little relation with the functional and social needs. We should help learners get aware of the primary function of language, to get across the messages, which is often neglected in Japanese conception of language function. In Japan where silence is golden and

eloquence is silver, the people are not used to expressing their own personal needs and their own personality by means of language.

3.3. LANGUAGE CLASS ENGLISH

School learners very often encounter the difficulties in conversing with foreign people and the several reasons are shown in Table 7, with two or more choices allowed.

Table 7 Reasons for the Difficult Communication with Foreigners in English

	All	Komazawa	Saitama
1. for feeling insecure with foreigners	40.2%	28.9%	45.8%
2. for too rapid pronunciation by foreigners	49.8%	56.6%	46.4%
3. for one's own poor pronunciation	27.1%	21.7%	29.8%
4. for fear of making mistakes	21.9%	26.5%	19.6%
5. for poor knowledge of appropriateness	75.3%	74.7%	75.6%
6. due to grammar-translation oriented English education	49.4%	43.4%	52.4%
7. for feeling too troublesome	13.1%	14.5%	12.5%
8. others	2.8%	3.6%	2.4%

When they engaged in communicative activity, more than three quarters had communicative intentions which they found it difficult to express, because of their poor knowledge of appropriateness. In actual fact, little regard has been given to audio and oral instruction and appropriateness in language use has been virtually ignored in school education.

The typical English class from Japanese middle school through college could be described as follows. Students sit in chairs in fixed rows. They look up at the teacher, who is at the desk in front of the blackboard, look down at the text books, and take notes. They seldom get their voice out, their voice is rarely heard. The teacher lectures and explains. Only the teacher's voice is heard inside and outside the classroom, while the learners just listen. And they take exams at the end of each term. It is no wonder that this kind of classwork do not produce a fluent speaker. Students spend a lot of time memorizing and manipulating fixed phrases and patterns of sentences without ever thinking about what they mean or how they might be appropriately used in real situations. Mere oral or written practice of expressions and grammar is most unlikely to make fluent speakers. Admittedly, as the above table shows, our classroom methods have often failed to bring about efficient and successful foreign language learners, but each learner is ultimately responsible for his own learning, which is true of any kinds of learning. Most of Japanese school learners of English have not lived and will not live in English language environment. They do not need to use English for communication inside as well as outside Japan. They are not exposed to the language in natural environment. Despite these, they got oral-oriented. To recapitulate, without a definite purpose to study English and without the full perception of the communicative needs of English, almost all of them got "English conversation" oriented. This is the number one reason for the poor proficiency in English.

Classroom work is never best fit for learning a foreign language, specifically in terms of the oral proficiency. However, it is often the case in Japan that the foreign language learning takes place only in the classroom. Formal instruction is the learner's only or major source of language experience. There is little opportunities

for natural exposure to “real” English. Some may disagree and say that Japanese learners of English have many opportunities to develop fluency. Of course, there are several means available to facilitate language learning: English language daily newspapers and weekly magazines, imported television programs with the original sound track broadcast over the multiplex system, foreign movies with the original sound track in the theaters, and so on. But these are limited in nature and only receptive learning means. With limited exposure, learners expect too much from formal education and come to have the misconception that English education at school would offer them everything needed to converse fluently with foreign people. To what extent and in what way does formal education help foreign language learning? We must define what classroom work can do and can not do to answer this question.

Needless to say, learning is most activated when the learner really gets involved in communicative activity and with poor exposure it is normally very slow. The classroom is the artificial world away from the community in which language is actually spoken. Classroom requires that the student should cope with the kind of language that is different from that used in interpersonal interaction in natural situations. Of course, at all levels of the school education system, from junior high school through university, more oral language instruction should be introduced, but the speech in formal learning is often not closely related to the immediate situation. Language little related to the social contexts where it is spoken is just like abstract algebraic symbols; communicative activity and algebra are totally different things. In addition to it, learners have a rare opportunity to use the language they have studied at school. Even under these unfavorable conditions there are some things that language class can offer, if classroom activity could be modified to implant the communicative value of language in learners. Not exposed to real life situations, they have much difficulty to realize they can do certain things with the language they have studied at school. Classroom communication can not be the same as the real life situations, but we can and have to get learners to perceive that the language can really do certain things.

4. CONCLUSION

This article is not to propose a new method; it is rather to describe what are the crucial inadequacies of the foreign language education at the college level.

There are two main reasons for the poor proficiency generally shown by Japanese school learners of English. One reason is concerned with motivation. The obsession with English conversation permeates Japan, but English language is truly a foreign language in the Japanese community within which it has no social functions. Most of learners do not have a clear reason to study English and a definite purpose for which to learn it. And they can not be earnest and successful learners. The other reason is that learners do not truly perceive the communicative needs of language, even though they very often say "eigo - de perapera shabe - reru youni nari - tai" . With little exposure to real English which is actually spoken as a communicative means, they have the difficulty to grasp the feeling that the language can really do certain things.

Under those circumstances what we can do is twofold: to get learners to think and clarify for what they learn English, which itself is not an easy task in a foreign language community, and to get them to realize the communicative value of language. Motivated students with specific learning objectives and trained teachers who would try to get learners to perceive the communicative function of language are the two essential conditions for efficient and successful foreign language learning in Japan.

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A P P E N D I X

英語及び英語教育に関するアンケートです。ちょっとお手間をおかけいたしますが、あなたの率直な気持ちを教えて下さい。ご協力お願い致します。なお、回答は、該当（がいとう）する番号を丸で囲んで下さい。

問1 あなたは今までに英語の必要性を実際に肌で感じたことがありますか。もしあるとすれば、それはどんな時でしたか、一つだけ丸をつけて下さい。

1. 実のところ必要性を強く肌で感じたことは自分は過去一度もない。
2. 外国に旅行した事があるが、その時やはり英語は必要だと痛感した。
3. 日本国内で外国人と接触せざるをえなかった時感じた（たとえば、アルバイト先で外国人のお客さんがいたり、外国人に英語で道を尋ねられた時、または隣に外国人が住んでいる等）。

4. その他（ ）

4に丸をつけた方はできるだけ具体的に書いて下さい。

問2 中・高六年間、そして今なお英語を勉強なさっていますね。いや、勉強させられているんだと思っている方もいらっしゃるでしょう。ところで、現在そして将来のあなたにとって英語は絶対に必要なものですか。複数丸をつけたいと思う方もあえて一つだけにしぼって丸をつけて下さい。

1. 本音でいえば自分のこれからの生活に英語はまず必要ではないだろう。
2. 自分は英語力が要求される仕事につくつもりであるから英語は絶対に必要である。
3. 日本を訪れる外国人がこれだけ多くなった現状では、日本人は誰もが最小限度の英語は絶対必要である。
4. 好むと好まないとにかかわらず、外国に行かされることがあるかもしれない。自衛隊の例もあるように。鎖国の江戸時代と異なるのだから、やはり英語は絶対に必要である。
5. 自分は外国人と日本国内または海外で積極的に交流したいと思っているので英語は絶対に必要である。
6. ただ時々外国旅行をしたいので英語が必要と思うだけである。
7. 英検一級等の資格試験に合格したいだけである。資格を有していると就職等に有利であるから。
8. 絶対必要ではないが教養として必要な気がする。たとえば、ささいなことかもしれないが、テレビの英語放送や洋画が字幕を見ずに理解できたほうがそれだけ自分の世界が広がるし、第一楽しい。
9. その他（ ）

問3 あなたが大学で英語を専攻した理由を教えてくださいなのですが、一つだけ丸をつけて下さい。

1. ただ単に英語が好きだから。
2. 国際化の時代、英語力を身につけることが重要だといわれているから。
3. 機会を求めて外国の人々と積極的に交流したいから。
4. 卒業後つきたい仕事に英語が必要であるから。
5. 高校時代、英語の成績が他の科目より良かったから。
6. 特に進みたい専攻もなく、なんとなく英語を専攻した。
7. 先生、家族、その他の人に勧められたから。
8. その他（ ）

問4 英語で話したい欲求を皆さん共通して持っているようですが、話すことは相手が必要とされます。英語で話したいからには外国人（英米人と限らない）が相手となるはずです。それでお伺いします。あなたは外国人と個人的に交流したいと思うほうですか。

1. 実は外国人はあまり好きではなく、できれば接触したくない。
2. 国際化時代だし、積極的に交流したいと思うし、そして視野を広げたい。
3. 積極的に交流したいとは思わないが、鎖国的に暮らすわけにはゆかないだろう。
4. 人間的な交流の面から外国人との接触をとらえたことはあまりなく、とくに英米人は生きた英語を教えてくれる存在としてしかみていない。
5. その他（ ）

問5 英語の授業も話すことに重きをおいて欲しいという希望が多いようです。また「英語がぺらぺら話せるようになりたい」という言葉もよく耳にします。ところで、どのような事柄をそんなに英語で話したいのですか。一つ丸をつけて下さい。

1. 普段仲の良い友達とおしゃべりしているような話題について英語で話したい。
例えば、昨夜みたテレビ番組、ボーイフレンド・ガールフレンドの話、週末の予定、割りのいいバイトの紹介等。
2. 自分自身のいろいろなことを話したい。
3. 日本のことを理解してもらいたいから、日本についてあれやこれや教えてあげたい。
4. 外国、特にアメリカや英国のことを知りたいので、それに関係したことを質問したり話し合ったりしたい。
5. 特定のトピックについて、例えば、現在話題になっているものでいえばPKO法案等についてディスカッションしたい。
6. 特別な話題はないが、なんとなくぺらぺら話したい。
7. その他（ ）

問6 仮に、英語の話し方において、次のような3種類の人がいるとします。あなたはどのタイプの人に一番“あこがれ”ますか。本音で答えて頂きたいのですが。

1. 内容に富んでいるが、つかえながらしゃべる。
2. 内容はあまりないがとにかくぺらぺらしゃべる。
3. 内容のあるなしに関係なく言葉が少ない。

問7 外国人、特に英語を母国語とする人と英語で話そうとするとなかなかうまくゆかないことを経験していると思います。それはなぜだと思いますか。幾つ丸をつけてもかまいません。

1. 英米人を目の前にすると、それだけでなぜか緊張してしまい、知っているはずの英語さえなにも浮かんでこなくなる。
2. 相手の英語が聞き取れない。
3. 自分の発音がよくない。
4. 間違ったらいけないと思ってしまう。
5. 伝えたいことがらはあるが、それをどの様な英語で表現したらいいかわからない。
6. 今まで英語を勉強する時はほとんど活字中心であり、生の音声を聞いたり自分の音声を発することによりなれていないので、話したいという欲求は強くあっても体からスムーズに声が出てこない。
7. 英語で話すことに憧れや欲求はあっても、いざとなると英語で話すのは大変な苦勞を伴うことが感じられ、なんとなく面倒になってしまう。
8. その他（ ）

あなたは延べ三ヶ月以上外国に滞在したことがありますか。〔有／無〕

あなたの専攻〔 学科〕 あなたの学年〔 年〕

大変ご面倒なことをお願いしました。
どうも有り難う御座いました。